



# Crucial Competencies for Business Leaders

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## Bridging the Gap between Performance and Expectation

By Kerry Patterson and Eric Patten

Not long ago, we worked with leaders from a large software company that struggled to get product out of a department it had formed two years prior. This particular department was created by merging several product lines and divisions into one. The leaders had thought that if they simply redefined the organizational chart, the change would occur and the unit would start producing. After two years, they realized how wrong they were: the new unit hadn't produced a single product.

Our team's job was to find out why.

As we began our interviews with employees, we received a number of responses:

*“The problem is that I'm still doing work leftover from my old position. I have two bosses: my current boss and the boss I had two years ago. I have to work twice as hard for twice as many people and I'm still making the same pay. It's not worth it.”*

And another:

*“The real problem is that management keeps changing direction on us. They tell us one thing, and then someone else is brought in and they change it the next month. There's no leadership.”*

Other key phrases we heard were: *lack of accountability, lack of vision, no clear road map, shifting priorities, and we can't meet a deadline because...*

## Changes For New Behavior

However, according to everyone we talked to, work was getting done. An old saying from Senegal may sum up the situation best: “Ten digging, ten filling—lots of dust, no hole.”

Subordinates were blaming management and management was blaming subordinates.

But the real problem ran deeper than placed blame. Changes called for new behavior. People had to do things they hadn't done before and someone else needed to make sure that they did it. Unfortunately, everyone—from top management to lowliest subordinates—routinely broke promises, breached agreements, and violated expectations. The crucial confrontations that should

have been held—confrontations about missed deadlines, face-to-face discussions about not “walking the talk,” and discussions about not following the vision—were absent. Accountability was non-existent.

During our twenty-five years researching organizational culture, process, and change management we routinely see that crucial confrontations are at the heart of every change project. Once an organization creates a vision of how things should be, it's essential that leaders not only share the vision, but then follow up and hold others accountable to living it.

The reason that vision and accountability should be inseparable is fairly obvious. With each new view of how the company will function comes a whole host of new behaviors employees will be expected to enact. For instance, with a new “team” project, people who used to behave independently are now expected to collaborate. Individuals who used to withhold their opinions in order to avoid being seen as naïve or perhaps contrary are now expected to share their differing views in order to maximize input.

### **Be the First to Live the New Vision**

But what if employees are not really sure if they should be the first to live the new vision? Maybe they should let someone else take the risk. So they don't exactly collaborate or share ideas—or whatever it is you're asking them to do. This is your moment of truth. If you don't hold the people who violate the vision accountable, if you don't rectify the problem on the spot, not only will you eventually fail to bring your vision to reality, but you'll undermine all future change projects. You've lost credibility. You've become another flavor of the month.

As a business leader, how do you avoid this common pitfall? In preparation for any change initiative or new project, you might want to spend as much time teaching accountability as you do creating a new vision. First, teach managers how to talk about violated expectations and broken promises. Second, teach skills on how to hold people accountable in a way that solves problems and builds on the relationship. These important steps prepare leaders for what they're sure to face as they set new expectations.

Once you've poured the foundation of accountability, you can then work on the rest of the change effort. But take note: starting with accountability takes a great deal of discipline. It's a lot more fun to brainstorm plans and create a new world view than it is to sit down with someone who has broken a promise. But you have to be able to do so if you expect people to change. People are going to resist, they are going to take a wait-and-see attitude, and you're going to have to know how to hold them accountable.

### **Ten Important Skills**

If you're interested in seeing what it takes to enhance leader's accountability skills, here are ten important skills for managing broken promises, violated expectations, and bad behavior. You can find these principles clearly defined in our book and training course—*Crucial Confrontations: Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations, and Bad Behavior*.

**1. Master the *Hazardous Half Minute*.** Most confrontations fail in the first thirty seconds. Before you even open your mouth you've held court in your head, found the other person guilty, and the verdict shows on your face and in the tone of your voice. As the other person reacts to your harsh judgment and insulting tone the discussion is doomed. To survive the *Hazardous Half Minute*, give others the benefit of the doubt. Ask yourself why a reasonable, rational, and decent person would let you down or do what they did? When you work on yourself before you open your mouth you turn the Hazardous Half Minute into a good start.

**2. Stick To The Facts.** When someone lets you down, you're likely to come up with your own explanation as to why they failed such as selfishness, laziness, and incompetence, you name it. To avoid leading the conversation with a conclusion that is may be true but is controversial and very likely to cause defensiveness, stick to the facts. Describe the gap between your expectations and what you observed. Start with your facts, then, if you feel it's really necessary, tentatively share your conclusions.

**3. Take Charge of Emotions.** When someone lets you down, you often feel disappointed and upset. If you're not careful, you carry these strong emotions into the confrontation. Effective leaders cut off their strong reactions at the source. So learn how to be curious rather than angry. Use your curiosity to propel you into a healthy confrontation rather than a dangerous attempt to punish the guilty. Address the infraction, but never be abusive or out of control when you do.

**4. Pick the Issue You Really Care About.** Most problems come in large bundles. A single infraction may include everything from a procedural violation to failure to keep a commitment to insubordination. Which issue do you address? Avoid picking the easiest or least controversial problem. Recognize the elements tied up in a single infraction, pick the most important issues, and then once and for all, resolve the problem that really matters.

**5. Avoid Groundhog Day.** When employees repeat mistakes, do you treat each instance as if it were the first one? If you do, you live the life of Phil Connors (in the movie *Groundhog Day*), who was forced to repeat the same day over and over again until he got it right. Savvy problem solvers avoid useless repetition by treating each infraction with increasing levels of severity and urgency. First, an employee has violated a quality procedure; the next time it happens, he or she has failed to live up to a promise; next, he or she is acting insubordinate; and so on.

**6. Diagnose Motivation and Ability.** After describing the problem to the other person, stop and listen. Fight your tendency to assume that all problems are a result of a lack of motivation. Often, when people fail to deliver on a promise, it's because they run into an ability barrier. As you begin the conversation stop and ask what happened. Then listen for both causal forces: Are they unable? Or, are they unmotivated?

**7. Avoid Power Like the Plague.** If it turns out that the person is indeed unmotivated, you may be inclined to discipline or threaten them using your power and authority. But wielding power will kill your relationship. To appropriately motivate your employee, make

the invisible visible. Explain the natural consequences of their actions or noncompliance. Talk about consequences to their job, their reputation, their relationships with coworkers and customers—really anything that matters.

**8. Don't Be Afraid to Make It Easy.** If it turns out the person is unable to perform the task, a motivational speech won't cut it. If the task is merely difficult but not impossible, you can try to motivate them. But save time and grief by simply making the task easier. Ask the other person what it'll take to remove the barrier. If they don't know, jointly brainstorm methods to remove the barrier.

**9. Don't Get Easily Sidetracked.** Watch out for possible distractions and side trips. Be flexible enough to recognize new problems as they arise, and if necessary deal with them. But put a marker on the original problem, and return to it after you've resolved the new problem. If the new problem is merely a deflection and not worthy of your attention, don't get deflected. Stay focused.

**10. End Well.** Once you've discussed the issue (motivating with natural consequences and making it easy where necessary), you'll eventually come to a resolution, and it'll be time to take action. Make it clear who should do what and by when. There is no "we" when you're assigning tasks. I do this, you do that. "We" never does anything. Also, without a deadline, you have set no actual goal.

By adopting these skills routinely used by top performers, you will cultivate a culture of accountability. Working in this culture, leaders and employees will not only feel enabled to adopt crucial change behaviors, but they will be able to ensure those around them are operating by the same standards.

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## About The Authors

Kerry Patterson coauthored the *New York Times* bestsellers *Crucial Conversations* and *Crucial Confrontations*, an acclaimed keynote speaker, consultant, and chief development officer of VitalSmarts. Patterson has designed and implemented major corporate change initiatives for the past 25 years.

Eric Patten is a senior consultant for VitalSmarts, an innovator in corporate training and organizational performance. At VitalSmarts he is developing a series of products to enhance Crucial Conversations Training, a powerful tool for improving organizational effectiveness, building teams, and enriching relationships.

### **About VitalSmarts**

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VitalSmarts currently has two training initiatives: Crucial Conversations® and Crucial Confrontations™. Each delivers a powerful set of influence tools that builds teams, enriches relationships and improves end results. The Company has two New York Times bestselling books based on this research of the same titles, Crucial Conversations and Crucial Confrontations. VitalSmarts also offers keynote speaking, on-site consulting, and executive team development.